

Mississippi River's basin needs upkeep, investment

Infrastructure, flood control among issues identified by study.

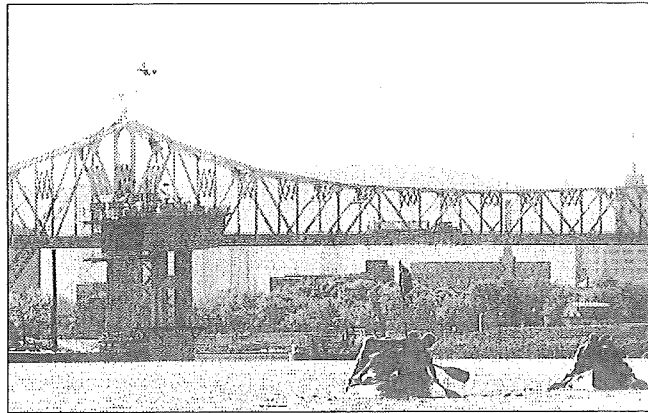
By JIM SALTER
Associated Press

ST. LOUIS - A report card is out on the Mississippi River basin, and the grade is not good: a D+, with an aging transportation infrastructure topping the list of concerns.

The report by America's Watershed Initiative, released Wednesday in St. Louis, assesses categories such as the abundance of clean water, flood control and risk, ecosystem health, the economy and recreation on the river and its watershed, which includes the Missouri, Tennessee and Ohio rivers and other tributaries. The watershed touches parts of 31 states and covers two-fifths of the continental U.S.

The biggest concern is the condition of infrastructure such as locks and dams, creating what initiative members call a threat to the nation's economy. The report card gave a D grade to infrastructure condition, and an F to infrastructure maintenance.

"Our aging water infrastructure desperately weakens America's capability to reliably and efficiently move and export food and goods," said



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More public and private investment is needed to ensure the Mississippi River's viability, a broad assessment concluded.

Stephen Gambrell, director of the Mississippi River Commission and a member of the initiative's steering committee.

The report said key components of many locks and dams are in poor condition, and lack of funding for maintenance "means that multiple failures may be imminent." Those failures would "result in severe economic, public safety and water security problems."

Poor marks were also given to water supply, flood control and flood risk reduction.

To control floods and reduce flood risks, the report said, new strategies are needed "that respond to a changing climate, rising sea level, coastal subsidence and erosion."

Jordy Jordahl, director of

America's Watershed Initiative, said the report card shows that more public and private financial investment is needed to ensure the viability of the watershed. While groups and local governments have had success individually, the key moving forward is better collaboration to improve the watershed as a whole, he said.

St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay said the report "does give us direction and it does give us a sense of urgency."

The report card is the initiative's first and was developed with the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science. The initiative comprises 400 representatives from business and the public sector with river expertise.